The angry Philippines

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She has never held political office; he has run the country unchallenged for 20 years. Her support is growing but untested; he commands a network of proven loyalists, whose reach extends into virtually every town and villlage. She is Corazon Aquino, 52, widow of the martyred opposition leader Benigno Aquino; he is Ferdinand Marcos, 68, president of the The Republic of the Philippines. In the rough-and-tumble world of Filipino politics, she is a rank neophyte matched against a consummate practitioner. But despite those odds a reluctant Aquino agreed last week to challenge Marcos in the country's first contested presidential election in 17 years, on Feb. 7.

Effigy: Aquino's decision followed by hours the signing of the law that formally proclaimed the election. And it came just one day after suspended armed forces chief Gen. Fabian Ver and 25 others were cleared of conspiracy charges in the 1983 assassination of her husband. Their acquittal—by a Marcos-appointed three-man tribunal — ignited a wave of protest demonstrations. Thousands marched down Manila's central thoroughfare, España Street, burning an effigy of Marcos. Then, in swift succession the president welcomed Ver, a distant cousin and former chauffeur, to his office in Malacanang Palace and reinstated him as chief of the armed forces. "His reinstatement may have been unpopular," Marcos said, "but we do not punish innocent people in this country."

Outraged by the court's decision,

Aquino, known to friends simply as Cory, succumbed to mounting pressure to enter the presidential race. Petitions signed by more than 1.2 million Filipinos urged her to run. For many Filipinos, her lack of political experience is a virtue—a guarantee that she has not g been stained by corrupM tion. One campaign sloz gan: "Not tainted, but jS sainted." Said Jaime x Cardinal Sin, archbishop of Manila and an Aquino adviser: "She is the last hope for the country." The election notice—which Marcos opponents have challenged in the Supreme Court as unconstitutional—was issued at a time of gathering crisis. The nation of 54 million people, a former U.S. colony, is beset by massive unemployment, a stagnant economy,

foreign debt exceeding $36 billion (Cdn.) and an increasingly potent Communist insurgency (page 26).

Despite increasing pressure from its chief ally, the United States, the 20year-old Marcos regime has undertaken only minimal reforms. Increasingly, analysts compare Marcos to other authoritarian

leaders who have fallen from power—notably, the shah of Iran (1979) and Anastasio Somoza Debayle in Nicaragua (1979). Like them, Marcos has been accused of widespread corruption and human rights abuses, but he remains firmly in control of the the military, the courts and the media.

Challenge: The opposition is realistic about the the strength and resources of the Marcos political machine. “With Mr. Marcos you can expect the worst,” said Aquino. “The challenge facing the opposition is not merely to field one candidate to face Mr. Marcos. It is to field a candidate who cannot be seen as a continuation of the Marcos regime.”

The opposition failed last week to meet that critical challenge. After extended talks, Aquinc and former senator Salvador (Doy) Laurel—the other main hopeful—announced on Sunday that they would not join forces on a single ticket headed by Mrs. Aquino. Rather than accept the vice-presidential slot, Laurel, 57, declared that he would remain in the race as a presidential candidate. At a Sunday press conference at his family home in East Manila, he blamed Aquino for the split, saying that she had refused to run under the banner of his political party, UNIDO. An Aquino spokesman denied the charge, adding that Laurel had declined to run under a joint banner that included LABAN, the party that adopted Aquino as its candidate. Still, Laurel did not rule out a possible compromise. “The door is not closed on agreement,” he said.

Influence: Even together, Aquino and Laurel would have confronted a formidable undertaking. Apart, they face an impossible one. The power of the president and his wife, Imelda, 56,

are pervasive. That influence was displayed again last week in the Ver trial. After seven months of legal manoeuvring and testimony, the judges upheld the military establishment’s explanation of Benigno Aquino’s death.

In a 90-page verdict that took a court clerk two hours to read the judges ruled: “It is not unreasonable to conclude” that a lone gunman, Rolando Galman, acting on, orders of the Communist Party of the Philippines, shot Aquino.

The decision flatly contradicted the conclusions of the Agrava commission, a fact-finding inquiry established shortly after Aquino’s assassination at Manila airport on Aug. 21, 1983. The commission, led by Judge Corazon Agrava, found evidence of a widespread military conspiracy to murder Aquino as he returned home after

three years of exile in the United States. That led to formal indictments against Ver, 24 military officers and one civilan. But the tribunal ruled that the evidence was irrelevant.

In response to Ver’s acquittal, Francisco Villa, a lawyer for the Agrava board, described the verdict as “legal insanity.” In Washington state department spokesman Charles Redman declared, “It is very difficult to reconcile the exemplary, thorough work of the Agrava board with the outcome of this trial.” Aquino herself insisted that the military would not have planned her husband’s murder without the president’s knowledge and consent. “Marcos had to give the order,” she said.

Some U.S. politicians have called for reductions or suspension of aid to the Philippines—at least until reforms are enacted. But the American position is compromised. The current aid agreement, a $900-million five-year package of economic and military assistance signed in 1983, is tied to American use of two strategic military outposts—the Clark Air Force and Subic Bay naval bases, located on Philippine soil. The Marcos government regards the aid package as rent on the bases, while the

Reagan administration considers $475 million—more than half the total—to be tied to progress on reform.

Reforms: The reforms have been slow in coming, although supporters note that Marcos introduced special legislation to permit the election two years before his six-year term officially expires. Still, the actual holding of the election remains in doubt. Twelve petitions questioning its constitutionality are now before the Philippine Su-

preme Court. Under the constitution, presidential elections can be held only when there is no president in office. But Marcos says that he will resign only if defeated. The court is scheduled to hear petitions on Dec. 17.

If the election is held, U.S. officials will monitor it closely. As one senior state department official said last week, the issue will be whether "it's reasonably free and fair or highly fraudulent." For his part, Richard Kessler, a senior associate at the Washington-based Carnegie Endowment said: "If Marcos did not let the trial go ahead [without interference], he's not going to let the election go ahead untampered with." But the results may fall into what one Reagan aide called "the grey spectrum."

Debate: Marcos himself said last week that outside observers would be welcome. "The mere fact that Mrs. Aquino and Mr. Laurel have declared their candidacy indicates that the elections will be fair and honest," he said. The president even indicated that he would be willing to meet Aquino in a televised debate. Said Marcos: "My conversations with ladies have always been pleasant. And I presume I will survive this encounter."

But the president's opponents have resources of her own—both political and financial. Cory Aquino's marriage to Benigno in 1954 was seen as a merger of two powerful clans—the Cojuangcos and Aquinos. The two families have been at the centre of economic and political power in the "Rice Bowl" of the Philippines—Tarlac province,

north of Manila—for generations. Indeed, soon after her candidacy was announced, Cory's sister-in-law, Lupita Aquino Kasiwahara, set up campaign headquarters in the family-owned Cojuangco Building in the Makati financial district of Manila.

Although the resources in the campaign are weighted in Marcos's favor, Aquino's supporters stress that she offers the nation what one described as a "moral alternative." For them, the election is less a campaign than a crusade. Before 1972, when Marcos declared martial law and imprisoned her husband, the demure, convent-educated housewife and grandmother had little or no political involvement. Then, during Benigno's seven years in prison, she became his spokesman, dealing

with the press, carrying letters to friends and keeping the family together.

When Aquino was released from prison in 1980 and allowed to go to Boston for heart surgery, Cory and the five children followed. Later, Benigno accepted a fellowship at Harvard University, a period that Cory called the happiest of her life.

Front: After Benigno's death, Aquino led rallies and counselled an outraged nation to mourn her husband peacefully while working to form a united front to oppose Marcos. Last summer, as opposition parties quarrelled over questions of leadership and campaign policy, religious, business

and political leaders urged her to assume her husband's mantle. In October she grudgingly agreed—but on two

conditions: if she were drafted, through petitions, by one million of her countrymen and only if Marcos called an election before the prescribed date in 1987. Three weeks ago the petition was ready. Last week the second condition was met. Still, she said, "I am not an eager candidate. In its history, the Philippines has never had such a reluctant candidate."

Spiritual: But the decision to run, she acknowledged, had been made even before the Ver verdict was handed down. Her rationale, she said, was the same as her husband's reason for leaving exile in the United States and boarding a plane for Manila. Recalled Aquino: "My husband said, T will never be able to forgive myself if I had to live with the knowledge that I could

have done something and did nothing.' I have to do something." In her first campaign appearances Aquino acquitted herself effectively. "Experience is not the answer to our problems," she said last week. "Here we have a man who has too much experience, and look what has happened to our country."

But even Laurel initially questioned her credentials. The son of a wartime Philippine president, Jose Laurel, the former Marcos supporter advised Aquino not to run, saying, "She should remain a spiritual leader." With Laurel's approval, supporters claimed that Aquino was being used by the Communists and that a woman would be too weak a candidate to run against Marcos.

Laurel's frustration was largely a result of having invested years of hard

work in order to win the presidential nomination. "Life is just not fair," said Marcos's labor minister, Bias Ople. "Laurel has combed the country for the nomination, and now someone who has not worked at it emerges as the choice." In the end, Laurel decided that his political wisdom —and the machinery of his United Nationalist Democratic Opposition —were assets too valuable to surrender for second place: the vice presidential nomination.

As the campaign begins, the challengers face a political machine rivalling New York City's legendary Tammany Hall in its reach and power. Marcos's New Society Movement party commands a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, controls the vast majority of municipal and provincial governments and for electoral campaign purposes has access to the national treasury. The Marcos network of friends and associates, richly rewarded by their association, is already at work. In the past nine months, the Philippine Central Bank has reported, about $1 billion (Cdn.) has flowed back into the country from abroad. Most of it, observers say, are funds repatriated by Marcos supporters to bankroll his campaign.

Power: Marcos had still not decided on his own vice-presidential running mate by the weekend. Some Filipinos predicted that he will name Imelda to the post, preparing her to succeed him, although both Marcos and his wife have issued denials. But even without an appearance on the ticket, the First Lady of the Philippines will play a major role in the election. As governor of metro Manila and minister of human settlements, she wields power in her own right. And with her husband in poor health, reportedly suffering from the serious kidney disease lupus, Imelda is expected to handle much of the physical campaigning. At a recent stop in the southern city of Cebu, Imelda danced across the stage and serenaded the audience with folk songs as the president, sitting rigid in his bulletproof vest, looked on.

The stakes, all parties concede, are high. “If Marcos wins,” said Aquino, “then we moderates will have lost out to the radicals. The Filipino people will then look for alternatives.” Other observers say that the Aquino-Laurel challenge is the last chance for democratic change in the Philippines. Declared Bren Guiao, who managed the political campaigns of Cory Aquino’s husband in the 1960s: “ It will be an exceptionally fraudulent election. But the difference [between the candidates] is people will not only vote for Cory, they will die for her.”

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